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Not-so-special games

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THE ISSUE: Partisan politics should play no role in lawmakers doing what it takes to help the state land new industry.

Let the games begin.

Oh, wait. Too late.

Five weeks after the Alabama Senate fractured over a failed takeover attempt by Republicans and dissident Democrats, the two sides are at it again. This time they're at odds over a special legislative session that could be critical to the state's success in luring thousands of new jobs and billions of dollars of investment.

Gov. Bob Riley last week said he is "strongly considering" calling lawmakers into special session Feb. 26 to get the Legislature to raise from \$350 million to \$750 million the amount a state commission can borrow to recruit new industry.

Alabama needs the extra bonding authority to offer incentives to several plants the state is recruiting. That includes the massive, \$2.9 billion ThyssenKrupp steel plant for Mobile County that would employ 2,700 people, a plant with 500 to 1,000 jobs for the Montgomery area, and a plant that would employ 1,500 in the Shoals area.

Thursday, the Senate Democratic Caucus urged Riley to forget a special session on Feb. 26. Instead, the caucus said the governor should wait until March 6 to call a special session within the regular session. The caucus in a letter to Riley said the state would save tax dollars by waiting. The cost of a five-day special session before the regular session would likely exceed \$100,000, while a special session during the regular session would cost much less, state officials estimated.

Here's where the game-playing begins in earnest. "It appears that the primary reason for calling a special session is because Republican senators plan to be obstructionists in the upcoming regular session," said Senate Majority Leader Zeb Little, D-Cullman.

The primary reason for calling a special session should be getting lawmakers to act as quickly as possible. Alabama voters have to OK a measure to raise the amount the state can borrow, but the earliest that could happen is three months after the session in which lawmakers approved the proposed amendment.

Thankfully, Riley ignored the caucus' call for delay. Friday, he called lawmakers into session Feb. 26.

Had Riley waited until March 6 to call a special session, the House and Senate would have to vote to go into one. When Riley tried to call a special session on ethics reforms within a regular session in 2004, Democratic majorities turned him down. Given the fractious Senate climate, why bet thousands of jobs and billions of dollars in investment on these guys agreeing to a special session?

Waiting eight days until March 6 may not matter at all in terms of landing these projects, or it could mean everything. Louisiana, which is Alabama's only competitor for the ThyssenKrupp project, already has approved a \$300 million incentives package.

Louisiana officials must be chortling with glee over news of Alabama's partisan jousting. But there's nothing funny about the prospects of Alabama losing so much over such small-minded games.

Thank goodness Riley is pursuing the projects full speed ahead. Senate Democrats should join him.

